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# ONE NORTH LASALLE BUILDING

One North LaSalle Street  
Chicago, Illinois

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Preliminary Staff Summary of Information  
Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks  
January, 1992

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## **ONE NORTH LASALLE BUILDING**

**(now American National Bank Building)**

**One North LaSalle Street**

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**Date: 1929-1930**

**Architect: K. M. Vitzthum & Company**

**Designers: Karl M. Vitzthum and John J. Burns**

Until the completion of the Daley Civic Center in 1965, the One North LaSalle Building, forty-nine stories in height, was Chicago's highest building. Designed by Vitzthum and Burns in 1929-1930, it stands on the northeast corner of LaSalle and Madison streets. Outwardly typifying the stripped, setback skyscraper style of the late 1920s and early 1930s and boasting a lobby lavishly decorated in superlative Art Deco ornament, the One North LaSalle Building is a major contributor to LaSalle Street's reputation as one of the city's premier architectural corridors.

### ***K. M. Vitzthum & Company, Architects***

In *The Sky's the Limit, A Century of Chicago Skyscrapers*, John Zukowsky notes that, "Although the firm of Vitzthum and Burns is little known in the history of Chicago's architecture, its partners designed several of the city's most visible tall office buildings." As well as the One North LaSalle Building, these include the Bell Building (now the Old Republic Building) at 307 North Michigan Avenue in 1925, the Midland Hotel (formerly the Midland Club Building) at 276 West Adams Street in 1927, and the Steuben Club Building (now Randolph Tower) at 188 West Randolph Street in 1929. Perhaps publication in this recent book is an indication that this firm deserves further investigation and analysis. The firm also designed more than fifty banks throughout the Midwest with the most frequently mentioned in Chicago being the Hyde Park State Bank Building (now the Hyde Park Bank and Trust Co.) at 1525 East 53rd Street in 1927-28.

John J. Burns, the junior partner in the firm, was born in New York City in 1886 and was a graduate of Washington University in St. Louis. The father of nine children, he lived in the Rogers Park area of Chicago. Burns died in 1956 and his obituary noted that he had been in

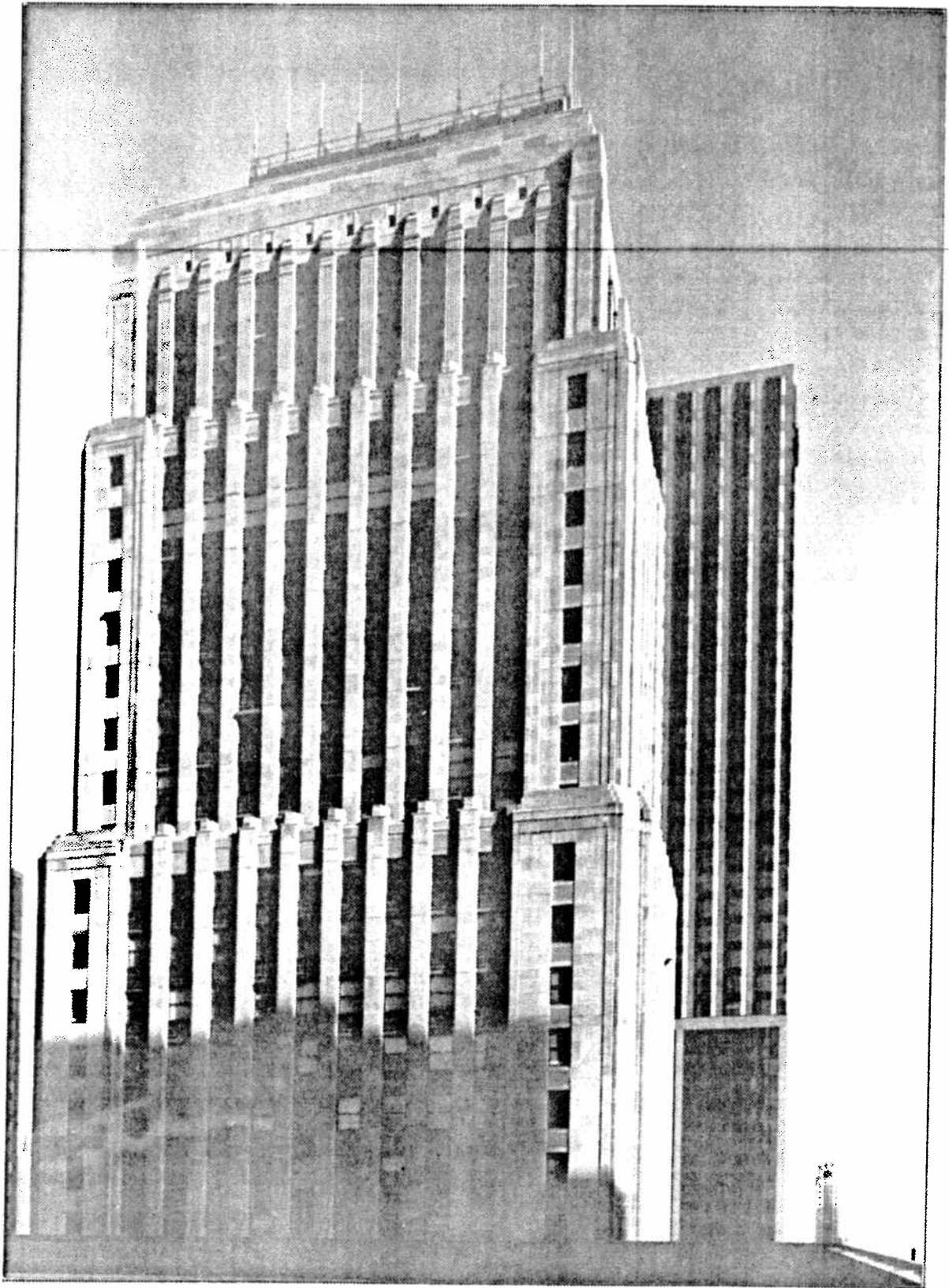
partnership with Vitzthum for forty years. Karl Martin Vitzthum, the principal partner, was born near Munich, Germany, on January 2, 1880. According to his biographical sketch in *Chicago and Its Makers*, by lineage he was clearly destined to be an architect. His father was an architectural engineer for the Bavarian Royal Railroad System and his grandfather was a contractor and builder responsible for several of the state buildings in Bavaria. His maternal grandfather was a cabinet manufacturer who held the important post of contractor at the Royal Court of Bavaria. Vitzthum graduated from the Royal College of Architecture in Munich before coming to the United States in 1902 and to Chicago in 1914. Before establishing his own firm, Vitzthum worked with such prominent architectural firms as D. H. Burnham and Graham, Anderson, Probst and White. When he died in 1967, Vitzthum had been serving on the City's Zoning Board of Appeals since 1958.

Burial services for Vitzthum were held at St. Thomas Aquinas Church, 5120 West Washington Boulevard. This religious structure was itself a 1923-25 Vitzthum and Burns commission and is near the architect's home at 5341 West Washington Boulevard. Another Catholic church by the firm is the well-known St. Peter's, located in Chicago's Loop at 110 West Madison Street. St. Peter's, according to Father George Lane, author of *Chicago's Churches and Synagogues*, has been called "a house of God in a valley of skyscrapers." It is interesting to note that the architect who created the temporal atmosphere of the area also designed the antidote to it. In fact, the church is almost literally next door to the skyscraper at One North LaSalle, providing an apt illustration of the range and ability of this little acknowledged partnership.

### *American Skyscraper Style - the 1920s*

The *New York Times* architectural critic and author Ada Louise Huxtable has characterized the skyscraper as the "uniquely American contribution to architectural history." This building form was pioneered in the late nineteenth century in Chicago, both technically and aesthetically. Engineering advances in steel-frame construction had been made by William Le Baron Jenney and Holabird and Roche. Louis Sullivan had developed, in theory and practice, an architectural expression for the tall American building. Nevertheless, architects were still uneasy or undecided about what really constituted an appropriate aesthetic. Beaux-Arts classicism, brought to the fore by the World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893, became popular, with the Gothic Revival a close second in choice by the architectural taste-makers. Both these systems relied heavily on the application of historical ornamentation and the creation of old-world picturesque effects.

By the late 1920s, however, architecture had divested itself of all historical souvenirs. Three factors were responsible for this, and once again Chicago played a part. In June of 1922, the Chicago Tribune Company announced a design competition for a new headquarters building. From amongst 260 submittals from 23 countries, the newspaper chose a "Gothic-gowned" design from the New York architects of Hood and Howells. But it was the 2nd prize-winning design that was to be the point of departure for American urban architecture of the



Three successive setbacks, the defining characteristic of the Art Deco skyscraper, accentuate the tower of the One North LaSalle Building. (*Bob Thall, photographer*)

coming decade. Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen's soaring tiered design established the vertically attenuated type of skyscraper as the ideal. Stylistic references to bygone architectural eras were eliminated.

Also instrumental in shaping the American office building of the 1920s were new zoning laws that were adopted across the country after 1916. Designed to provide maximum air and light to the street in the densest business areas of major cities like New York and Chicago, the new ordinances allowed greater building height only if the structure stepped back from the street at various levels. The complex formulas of the zoning laws, born out of a practical necessity, created a distinctive new building contour which came to characterize structures of this vintage. As architectural historian Robert Bruegmann explains:

As architects and builders experimented with the laws, they realized that by paring away all of the projecting cornices and applied ornament, not only could they get the most rentable space for the client's dollar, but they could also create structures that were impressive enough with their dramatic mountainous massing to need little ornament.

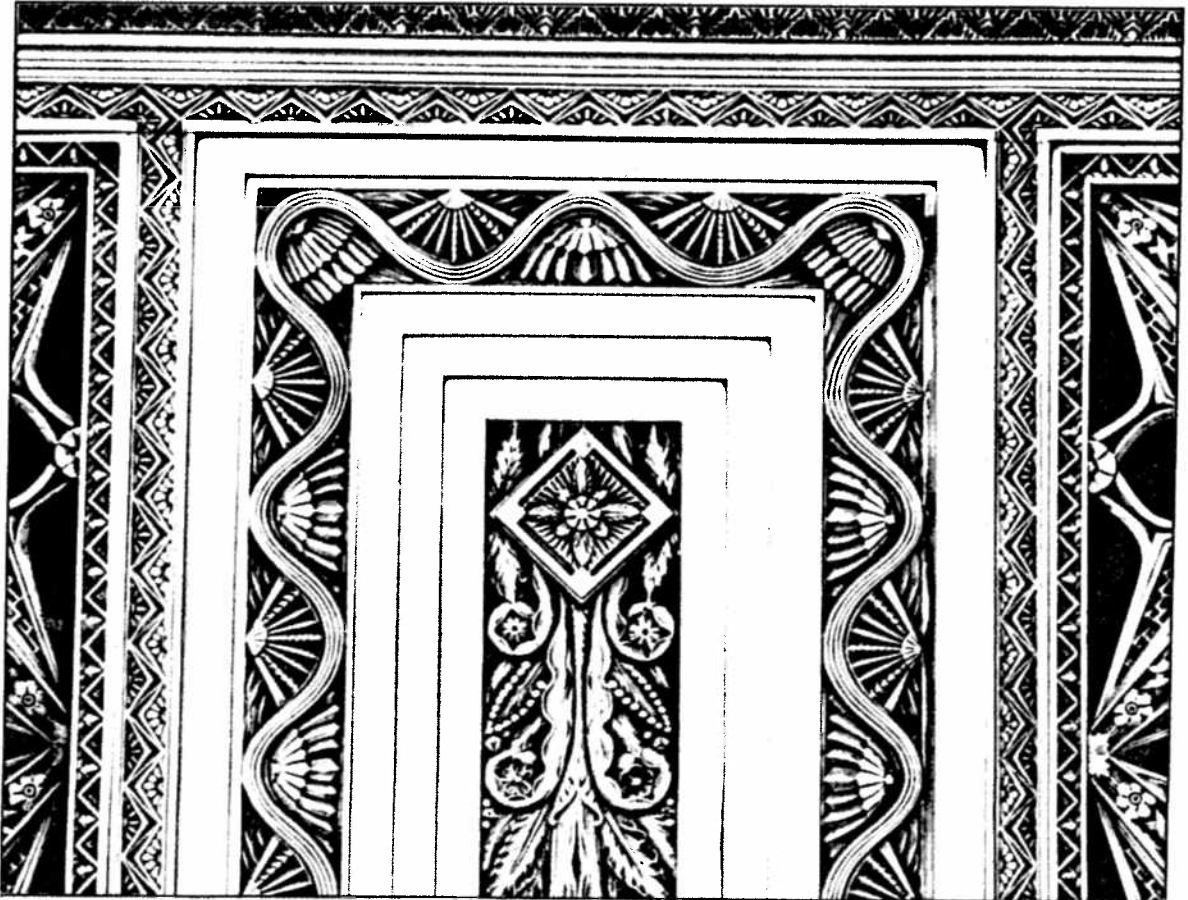
The last element to have a profound impact on American architecture of this decade was the decorative style of the Art Deco, so-called because it can be said to have been founded at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes held in Paris in 1925. Its impact on both the fine and decorative arts - architecture, painting, sculpture, furniture, fashion, textiles, ceramics, jewelry, and the graphic arts - would reverberate throughout the Western World. American architects seized on Art Deco as the right visual language with which to embellish the skyscraper to emphasize its modernity.

Tracing the genealogy of Art Deco reveals a mixed parentage. Out of the past came colorful Aztec and Mayan Indian iconography. Motifs came from ancient Oriental, African, and Egyptian civilizations as well. Less distant a source was the Art Nouveau of the 1890s with its emphasis on expensive and opulent materials and fine craftsmanship. Contributing also was the turn-of-the century Viennese Secession style promulgated by the Wiener Werkstatte founded in 1903 by Josef Hoffman. German Expressionism and Italian Futurism were additional factors in the equation. In America, Frank Lloyd Wright's development of an abstract, geometric ornament was also influential. Above all, Art Deco was enthralled with the future and exploited new materials such as plastics, plywood, stainless steel, chrome, and aluminum. Design elements inherent in machine-made objects--relative simplicity, planarity, symmetry, and unvaried repetition of elements--were used as themes in Art Deco. Innovative ornament enriching building surfaces included profuse curvilinear and floral intertwinings and dense crystalline and mechanistic patterns. Carved figures in motion reflected the preoccupation of the times with aerodynamics. Art Deco expression coincided perfectly with the social mood in America during the 1920s, a time of optimism, energy and unfailing belief in the benefits of material progress.

## *The One North LaSalle Building*

The One North LaSalle Building, with its simplification of surfaces, vigorous articulation of geometrical volume, and tightly organized fields of finely detailed ornament, make the One North LaSalle Building a totally contemporary expression for its time. Anchored securely on a five-story base, the building, sheathed above its granite-faced first floor in Bedford stone, streams straight up to a height of 530 feet with a total of forty-nine stories. Above the base a recessed tower rises in three slab-like parts, each one successively decreasing in height as the structure soars upwards. The tower is flanked at the front by two projecting wings which act to further compress the tower and accent its movement skyward. Tightly enclosed by narrow end bays with fluted corners, the piers rise in clean, unbroken lines to the tapered square of the roof top. By recessing slightly the vertical bands of windows behind the piers, the architects has assured that nothing will detract from the sharp, uncluttered silhouette of the building. Within these vertical window bands, terra-cotta spandrels show vestiges of the Beaux-Arts classicism in which Vitzthum and Burns were well-versed and even working concurrently with their more contemporary design for One North LaSalle. In the opinion of Carl W. Condit in *Chicago, 1910-1929*, this building "has the most emphatic vertical pattern of all Chicago skyscrapers."

Detail of the wealth of intricately patterned bronzework ornamenting the entrance of the One North LaSalle Building. (Terry Tatum, photographer)



If, by the late 1920s, architects had discarded history as an architectural reference point, they were not devoid of a sense of history. Large-scale, low-relief figure panels banding the One North LaSalle Building at the fifth floor salute the famous explorers who fostered settlement in Chicago and beyond. Depicted are LaSalle, Marquette, Columbus, Clark, Joliet, and the Iroquois Indians. The sculptor was the highly regarded Leon Hermant who is also credited with the two great figures standing on the pylons flanking the main entrance. These represent, respectively, Commerce and Transportation, themes certainly appropriate to an age that celebrated the advances of business, science, and industry.

Leon Hermant (1866-1936) was a leader in Chicago's French community. Born in France, he had studied in Paris, coming to the United States in 1904 to work on the French pavilion at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis. Although he returned to France to fight in World War I, he eventually settled permanently in Chicago. His sculpture was exhibited at the Art Institute in 1918 and 1919. Hermant's sculptural reliefs also adorn the Illinois Athletic Club and the Inter-Continental Hotel (originally the Medinah Athletic Club). Perhaps Hermant's most noted work is the 1928 Louis Pasteur Memorial. Originally erected in Grant Park, it was moved in 1946 to the center of the green space in front of Cook County Hospital to serve as an inspiration to the medical students studying at nearby hospitals. For this work, the French government awarded Hermant the Cross of the Legion of Honor. As demonstrated on the One North LaSalle Building, Art Deco frequently produced a harmonious collaboration between the architect and the sculptor.

Low-relief panels by the noted sculptor Leon Hermant depicting America's heroic explorers band the One North LaSalle Building at the fifth floor. (Bob Thall, photographer)



Art Deco was above all a democratic style. When applied as ornament on architecture, it was concentrated on those parts of a building most often seen and used by its occupants whether it be an executive or his secretary. That meant immense attention to the entranceway, exterior grillwork, doors, vestibules, and banks of elevators. In the May, 1931 issue of *The American Architect*, the New York firm McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin, designers of the 1923 New York Telephone Company Building, offered this rationale for this kind of design decision:

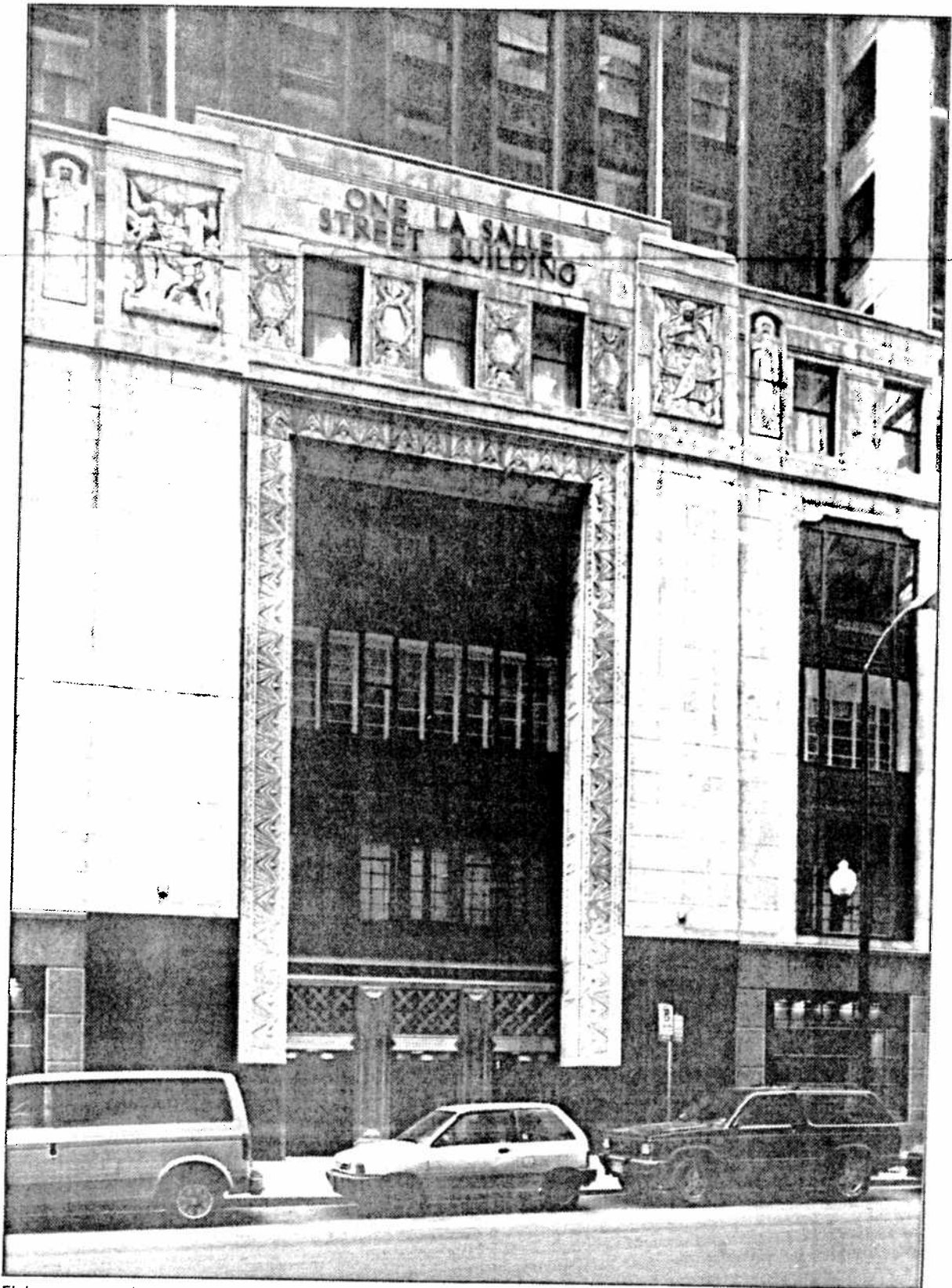
It creates a feeling of friendliness because of its interest to the passerby. In many ways, in the skyscraper it should afford to the eye a welcome rest from the gigantic power of mass and in so doing aid to bring down to a human scale, that which otherwise is too great for comfortable comprehension.

One North LaSalle Building not only fulfills but surpasses this dictum. Of particular effect in the lobby are the elevator doors of cast bronze displaying sinuously curved, full-figured female figures. The one on the left symbolizes "Success" and the one on the right symbolizes "Reputation." With their arms raised upwards, the figures suggest the anticipated whoosh of the swiftly moving elevator about to be entered. So singular are the lighting elements in this public space that the building's prospectus devoted a special paragraph to their description, saying:

One of the most striking effects in the whole city has been achieved by the tens of splendid peacock light bracket lamps. These brackets are 4 feet high and are hung 4 feet above the floor. The tail of the peacock on the bracket is fretted with green glass through which a dull light shines. The bright reflection of the bracket's main light is against the walls and ceiling, which gives a very charming and fetching beauty to the whole lobby.

The lobby, with its wealth of Art Deco detailing in rich green-black marble, shiny gold bronze, and white plaster, exemplifies the style at its most exuberant and extravagant. One can speculate that Karl Vitzthum, whose roots were in Bavaria, a part of Germany rich in the Baroque-Rococo decorative tradition, was very comfortable with that strain of Art Deco which offered such a richly imaginative vehicle for artistic expression. Equally lavish is the main entrance with its bronze surrounds carried out in a wealth of intricately patterned stylized fauna and flora motifs, reminiscent of medieval Celtic designs found in Ireland and Scotland. Perhaps this reflects the heritage of John J. Burns, an Irish-Catholic American. Whatever the reasons, the One North LaSalle Building offers an example of embellishment rarely encountered in the extant downtown Art Deco skyscrapers.





Elaborate attention to a building's main entrance would be a hallmark of the Art Deco office building. Although commonly referred to as "One North LaSalle," the building was originally called the One LaSalle Street Building. (Bob Thall, photographer)

## *One North LaSalle Building: Its Contribution to LaSalle Street*

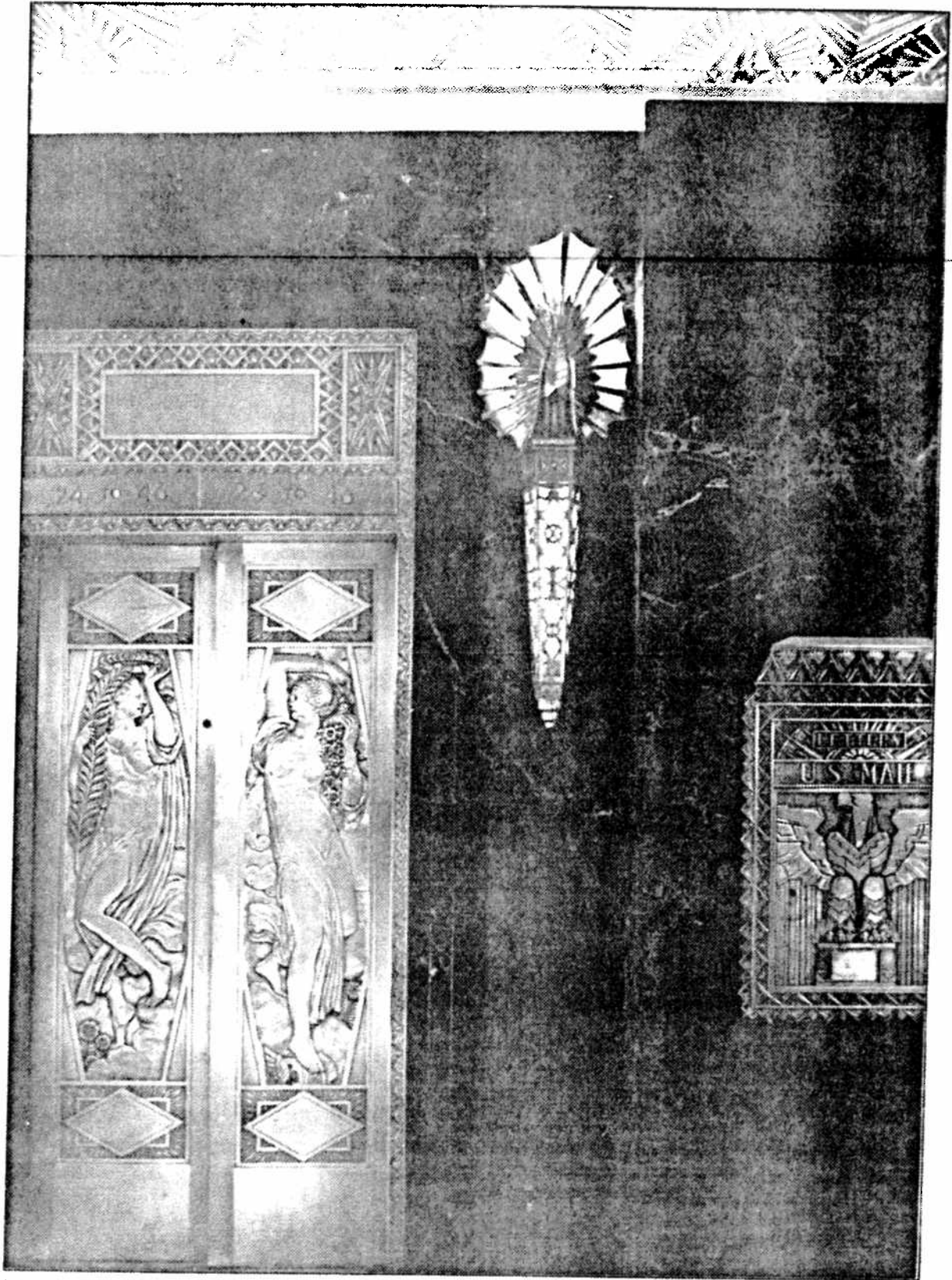
LaSalle Street has, since the rebuilding of Chicago after the Great Fire of 1871, been recognized as the financial center of the Midwest. The street takes its name from Robert Cavalier (1643-1687), Sieur de La Salle, the French explorer who, as legend would have it, camped on the site of the One North LaSalle Building on his way to claim the Mississippi River for France.

Other historical connotations mark this particular site on LaSalle Street. It was previously occupied by Holabird and Roche's Tacoma Building which, as the *Chicago Tribune* noted on August 5, 1928, "was erected in 1889, and for years architects have battled with typewriter, pencil, and printing presses over the question of whether or not this was the first steel skeleton building in the world." The other contender was William Le Baron Jenney's 1885 Home Insurance Building. When both buildings were torn down in the 1920s, three select committees--one appointed by the Marshall Field Estate which owned the Home Insurance Building, another by the Illinois Society and the American Institute of Architects, and the third by the Western Society of Engineers, carefully examined the evidence. The Tacoma Building was found not to be as fully of steel construction as the Home Insurance but the Tacoma proved to be the first building with a riveted steel frame as opposed to the Home Insurance Building with its bolted steel frame. Nevertheless, such was the reputation of the Tacoma Building that, during the wrecking process, pieces of the steel girders were given to various contractors and architects as souvenirs.

Marketing brochures for the One North LaSalle Building called the location "an address of prestige" and the *Chicago Tribune*, again for the August 5, 1928 article, noted that christening the building by its street number was "following the vogue of using numbers for names, a Gold Coast method of nomenclature now spreading in the Loop." The One North LaSalle Building perfectly expressed the tempo of the 1920s as Alastair Duncan noted in *American Art Deco*:

The tall commercial building personified the country's buoyant mood in the 1920s. The cathedrals of commerce that scraped the skies were monuments to man's ingenuity and energy. They showed, above all, that capitalism worked. They were also uniquely American, an irrefutable proof of America's leadership in engineering technology.

Sharing a kinship in period and style with the nearby Field and Board of Trade buildings, the One North LaSalle Building is one of the LaSalle Street canyon's most important real estate assets, witness to a pivotal period in Chicago's architectural and economic history.



The lobby of the One North LaSalle Building exemplifies Art Deco decorative styling in its most vital and sumptuous phase. (Photograph by the Sadin Photo Group, Ltd.)

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Additional research material used in the preparation of this report is on file at the office of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks and is available to the public.

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*Staff for this publication:* Meredith Taussig

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